

# Overcoming Difficulty in Shared Governance Begins with Agreement on the Institution's Future

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Practicing effective shared governance in which the board, administration and faculty join forces to affect institutional outcomes has become increasingly difficult on college and university campuses. Governance constituents find it difficult to make collaborative decisions due in part to the significant expansion of campus administrations and changes in faculty personnel. According to the Education Department, in the past ten years the number of college and university administrators has increased 50% faster than the number of instructors. While there are greater numbers of instructors, only a small percentage of them are now offered full-time, long-term appointments. In fact, graduate students and contingent faculty make up 75% of the instructional staff on American campuses, according to the AAUP, leaving fewer and fewer full-time faculty with long-term commitment to their institutions, not to mention the time or interest to participate in governance. As a result, many of the organizational responsibilities in which faculty previously participated are now largely managed by the administration, including the once joint activity of envisioning and planning for the institution's future.

With an ever expanding administration, former shared governance practices on many campuses have evolved into corporate-style management, believed to be more efficient and responsive to external pressures. Experience has demonstrated that in dealing with some institutional issues, this management style is highly effective; however, for others issues—particularly those that require faculty participation for successful execution—the approach is counterproductive. Faculty often will resist decisions they regard as top-down. Without meaningful involvement upstream when decisions are being made, faculty participation later during implementation becomes a distasteful obligation rather than a sincere commitment to achieving shared success. Transforming a ‘what’s in it for me’ campus attitude to what is best for the institution’s long-term viability

requires a strong foundation for shared governance which is built through the early and frequent engagement of stakeholders in shaping a common future.

Shaping a common future begins with reaching agreement on the institution's mission. As steward of the mission, the board is responsible for keeping in the forefront a unified picture of the purpose and future of the college or university. Tenured faculty with long institutional service, rightly believe they also are keepers of the mission. Rarely do both parties have the opportunity to discuss freely 'who are we and where are we going' in the context of the institution's strengths, legacy and future aspirations. Most campuses only engage in discussions about the institutional vision at seminal times in the lifecycle of the college or university: during presidential transitions, in the development of a new strategic plan, and when faced with external change that threatens operations. However for honest and productive discussion among governance constituents, this vital discourse needs to occur regularly and not just during times of change when the administration, faculty and board are under pressure.

There are a variety of ways to ensure opportunities for fruitful discussions about your institution's mission and future. The key is that these conversations take place often enough that they become incorporated into your campus's culture and practices, beginning with the orientation of new members to the institution and continuing throughout the calendar year. The following ideas are taken from institutions where shared governance is actively practiced and where responsibility for the institution's future is jointly taken:

- Opportunities for establishing understanding of the institution's mission:
  - Organize panel discussions with representative members of the faculty, administration, board, and student body on specific mission-related topics as part of the orientations of new board members, new faculty and new staff.
  - Evoke the institution's history and purpose during convocation ceremonies for new students.

- Invite members of the faculty and board to participate in discussions on mission-related topics at staff retreats. Similarly, invite administrators and board members to participate in discussions at faculty retreats.
  
- Opportunities for campus-wide discourse on the future of the institution:
  - Celebrate the college's *Founder's Day* by inviting former campus thought-leaders to speak on a topic of past importance to the institution, followed by small group discussions with faculty, staff, students and board members on the application of the topic to current circumstances.
  - Hold an annual *Big Picture Day* on which member of the entire campus are invited to hear updates on key institutional initiatives, student enrollment and retention status, the annual fund, the endowment and spending rate, budget challenges and overall progress on institutional goals.
  - Address the questions of 'who are we and where are we going' during an annual board meeting reserved specifically to deal with issues of strategic importance to the institution.
  - Invite division heads or department chairs to present to the board their views of the division or department's future challenges as they relate to the institution's identity and relevancy in the changing higher education environment. & Leadership

The occasions for building common understanding illustrated in these examples go a long way toward establishing the vital and continuing interchange of ideas from the faculty, administration and board on the purpose and future of the institution. By coming together regularly, familiarity and trust increases between individuals from different areas of the institution, and as a result, mutual values and aspirations are established which serve as powerful motivators for developing the strategy that enables you to successfully achieve your institutional vision.